

Proceedings of the 5<sup>th</sup> Symposium

**THE INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL  
FOR TRADITIONAL MUSIC  
STUDY GROUP ON  
PERFORMING ARTS  
OF SOUTHEAST ASIA**

Symposium Themes

- (I) Crossing Borders through Popular Performance Genres in Southeast Asia
- (II) Tourism and the Performing Arts in Southeast Asia
- (III) New Research

Special Ten-Year Anniversary Edition:  
Remembering Ki Mantle Hood, Ethnomusicologist



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## TANGO IN PARADISE: WHY DANCE *TANGO ARGENTINO* ON BALI?

Kendra Stepputat

University of Music and Performing Arts Graz, Austria

Four years ago I planned a trip to Bali and when I saw that *tango argentino* dance events (*milongas*) are organized regularly in the villages of Seminyak and Ubud, I was excited. Having lived on Bali for some time and been a tango dancer for more than a decade, this seemed like a dream come true. While packing my tango shoes, I became curious about the circumstances: Who dances tango on Bali? If there are Balinese among the dancers, what drives them to dance this dance that is seemingly so different from all other music or dance forms manifest in present day Bali?

### *Tango Argentino* Music and Dance—A Short Overview

*Tango argentino* has its genesis more than 100 years ago at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Rio de la Plata area of Uruguay and Argentina. The capital cities Montevideo (Uruguay) and most importantly Buenos Aires (Argentina) were places where migrants from Europe, Africa and native South/Latin Americans met. They brought their diverse cultures with them, combining, experimenting, and developing something new. The tango came into being, bearing elements from a variety of cultures (see Torp, 2007). Dance, music, and lyrics developed in parallel, and all three are still closely related in *tango argentino* practice today.

Two forms of *tango argentino* dance practice currently co-exist: the staged, choreographed tango (*escenario*) and the social dance tango (*pista*) (see Cara, 2009). The focus of my research is solely on the social dance tango *pista*. It is an improvisational couples' dance based on a common movement repertoire that allows both tango dancers to jointly improvise instantly, even if they have not danced with each other before. The challenge of dancing with new partners and having a physical connection to somebody unknown is at the core of the dance experience. Learning to dance tango is a long-term and never-ending endeavour; it takes years to properly master both parts (the lead and the follow).

Tango music for social dancing is mostly taken from recordings made in the “golden age” of tango in Buenos Aires (1930s-1950s). The tango orchestras of that time (*orquesta típica*, consisting of piano, bass, violins, and *bandoneóns*) were mostly known under the name of the orchestra leader, for instance Juan D'Arienzo, Carlos Di Sarli, and Hanibal Troilo. Tango music of the golden age makes use of functional harmony and tonal melodic constructions, employing more minor than major scales, and are mostly composed in a song structure with two alternating main parts (A and B). Sometimes a female or male singer is part of the arrangement (see Link & Wendland, 2016). Even today, the vast collection of recordings from the golden age is considered to be the main corpus of tango music for dancing by most social tango dancers. Some contemporary tango ensembles and orchestras focus on playing tango music for dancing, either interpreting golden age compositions for dancing or composing new pieces in the golden age style.

Tango is a cosmopolitan performing arts genre, practiced today in cities around the world (see Fares, 2015). In countries where economic stability allows for such an intensive hobby, performing arts practices are politically and culturally accepted, and physical contact in public between man and woman, woman and woman, man and man, are officially allowed and not culturally frowned upon. Tango dancers come from a variety of cultural and regional backgrounds and are of all ages and genders. The cosmopolitan tango network remains connected primarily through traveling and social media (Stepputat, 2017).

### The Tango Community in Bali

Many urban centres in Southeast Asia have a lively *tango argentino* scene, Manila, Jakarta, Bangkok or Kuala Lumpur being prominent examples. The tango community on Bali, in contrast, is small, but the structures are the same as in any other tango community I have encountered. A few key people organize *milongas* and practice evenings (*prácticas*) or invite guest teachers and are surrounded by a fluctuating number of people who are involved to a varying degree, ranging from active assistance in organizing tasks and regular participation to temporary or seldom appearances. Currently there are two locations where *milongas* and *prácticas* are regularly organized, the Blu Café and Restaurant in Ubud on Sundays and the Casa Artista<sup>1</sup> in Seminyak on Fridays. The tango dancer most active in keeping the Ubud community together

is Kirill Shapran from Russia. Together with two fellow tango dancers (Michelle Navarro and Valentino Luca), he started building the tango community in Ubud in 2014 and has continued ever since.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 1. Milonga in the Casa Artista (left) and Hujan Locale (right), July 2014.  
(Photographs by K. Stepputat)

The owner of the Casa Artista in Seminyak is Stefani Kang, who must be considered the mother of tango in Bali. Stefani is from Germany and has lived on Bali continuously for 36 years. Stefani invited the first tango teachers to Bali in 2002, since which the tango community has grown slowly but steadily to approximately 20-30 people. She founded the Tango Bali Club in 2006 and organizes weekly *milongas* and *prácticas*. She also organized the annual “Tango Bali Festival” from 2005 to 2015 and regularly invites professional guest teachers to Bali.<sup>3</sup>

The two tango communities in Ubud and in Seminyak overlap, and active dancers go to events in both places. Between 10 and 20 dancers show up at the regular *milongas* and *prácticas*; approximately two thirds are women. The tango community on Bali is an expatriate culture. According to Stefani, members come from a wide variety of countries, ranging from the neighbouring island Java to Japan, Australia, Korea, and also including European countries and the Americas. While some of them continuously live on Bali, others go back and forth on business but spend a considerable amount of time there. In addition to this local tango community, tourists who are already tango dancers might drop by and go to a *milonga* while on vacation in Bali. Stefani stated that over the years, only a very few Balinese, male and female, have started to dance tango, and none of them have stayed in the community for a longer time. Obviously, my initial research question needed to be adjusted: why are the Balinese not as interested in dancing tango as the expatriate community?

I do not intend to give a final answer to this. The perspective I take in this small research project is that of the tango practicing expatriates on Bali and their ideas, insights, interpretations, and speculations on why the Balinese are not drawn to tango. This approach sheds light on two aspects; first, what tango dancers consider important in tango culture and what their own priorities are, and second, their insights into “Balinese culture” and how it supposedly differs from “their own” or, in Turino’s terms, the cultural cohort they are a part of (see Turino, 2008). For this purpose, I informally talked to dancers at the *milongas* and *prácticas* in Bali, chatted with Kirill Shapran through social media, and conducted formal interviews with Stefani Kang and Robert Jahr.<sup>4</sup> In addition, I asked for feedback from Balinese who are not tango dancers concerning these speculations.

Both Stefani and Robert identified several issues they consider relevant for why the Balinese are generally not interested in *tango argentino*. I will sum up the most prominent ones here. The first issue is related to the music. For tango dancers, it is important to have an intimate relationship to the music and be able to interpret it through their dance and have at least a basic knowledge of tango music structures and the most important orchestras of the golden age. Of course, tango music is very different—its structure, organization, sound quality and so on—from Balinese music, but also from other musics that a general Balinese audience is acquainted with. Tango dancers on Bali agreed that for someone with such a different listening experience, it is probably hard to “get into the feeling” of tango music. My interlocutors thereby addressed the problem of the Balinese being unfamiliar with the music and, thus, the difficulties in relating to it emotionally, which they consider one of the most important elements in tango dancing.

The second issue is the “missing fun.” This statement actually relates to two separate aspects of tango culture. First, tango dancers mentioned the “sad quality” of tango music (minor scale, straight beats),

which is not as flashy and fun as other dance music with a major scale and upbeat structure. Second, they agreed that it is “no fun to learn tango.” Robert stated that salsa, for instance, “...can be learned on the dance floor.” Salsa dancing has a steep learning curve, which is in stark contrast to tango, where dancers will train for several years until they feel competent enough to go dancing at a *milonga* for the first time.

The third and possibly most important issue was the embrace. Tango is danced with a lot of physical contact; arms, torsos, and sometimes legs touch in a close embrace. For many people, it is strange to separate physical proximity from physical attraction, especially if the culture in which they were brought up restricts physical closeness to strangers, in particular those of the opposite sex. My interlocutors all agreed that it is probably very difficult for Balinese to maintain—let alone enjoy—constant physical closeness with strangers. These were the three main issues tango dancers addressed when speculating why there were no Balinese in the local tango community.<sup>5</sup> I would like to add another aspect that none of the interlocutors mentioned yet all the Balinese I spoke with found to be relevant.<sup>6</sup> Both tango communities and their venues are in areas that have a strong tourist infrastructure and at the same time are geographically removed from urban areas mainly populated by people with higher education and wealth. The Balinese with such backgrounds who might be interested in dancing tango may either not know of the existence of tango on Bali or (if they knew) think that these events are not meant for them.

### The Economic Factor

Dancing *tango argentino* is expensive. A dancer needs shoes, proper clothing, money for lessons, and entry fees. Is *tango argentino* too expensive for the Balinese? It is not as easy as saying that expatriates have more money and therefore can afford to dance tango while the Balinese cannot. Many expatriates on Bali can barely afford to live properly in their countries of origin and are subject to precarious working conditions. On the other hand, members of the Balinese middle class—especially those in urban areas—can be considered economically stable enough to afford a hobby like tango. The classical argument of rich expatriates versus poor Balinese falls short.

I mentioned earlier that some Javanese are part of the tango community in Seminyak. I talked to two of them—both male dancers—and both reported that they had learned to dance tango from Stefani because she needed more male tango dancers. One of them used to be a salsa dancer and switched to tango at some point. Both of them added that they are paid as “taxi dancers” by the Casa Artista to come to *milongas* and “dance with the ladies.”<sup>7</sup> Stefani confirmed this; in 2014, they got 250,000 Rp per evening, which is a considerable sum. Dancing tango provides them with additional income; both have stable daytime jobs.<sup>8</sup> Stefani stated that of course some of them genuinely like to dance tango, but because of the established taxi dancer system, they make sure they get paid for all of their dancing and will not show up to a *milonga* without payment. She laconically added: “In a way I understand it, but at the same time, I don’t.”<sup>9</sup>

As a last point, I want to address another aspect of tango dancing on Bali related to an inner-Indonesian economic imbalance. Since 2002, the tango festival “Tango in Paradise” has been organized on Bali by the tango club “Tango Lovers Jakarta.”<sup>10</sup> For this large festival, mainly tango dancers from Jakarta fly to Bali to dance and enjoy the surroundings. For them, the “exotic resort” factor is the most prominent reason to come to Bali for dancing. According to several dancers from the Balinese scene, the mostly female tango dancers from Jakarta usually bring their own taxi dancers and do not mingle with local dancers.<sup>11</sup> The Jakarta tango crowd is perceived as coming for short holidays in an enclosed luxury resort and then leaving again, as any other standard tourist would do. Compared to this, the non-Indonesian tango scene on Bali suddenly looks very local.

### Summary and Conclusion

The *tango argentino* community on Bali is composed of expatriates from other Asian countries, America, and Europe. The organizational structure of the tango community on Bali is the same as in tango communities elsewhere in the world with one addition: the taxi dancer phenomenon, which is established in some local dance communities (mainly in Asia) but generally not common in cosmopolitan *tango argentino*. The Balinese are only a very small part of the tango scene on Bali. Tango dancers on Bali speculate that this is mainly due to the unusual physical closeness in tango, the missing fun in music and dance, and the unfamiliarity with *tango argentino* music, which causes a difficulty in emotionally relating to it. An economic imbalance between expatriates and the Balinese is less relevant than that between tango dancers from Java and those living on Bali, and it is probably not the reason why the Balinese don’t dance tango. It is possible,

however, that the disinterest in *tango argentino* arises from the fact that all tango venues are located in tourist areas away from Balinese urban life.

I would like to end with the statement that although in general, very few Balinese are drawn to tango, the small but stable expatriate *tango argentino* scene has become a part of Balinese performing arts practice. Expatriates are a part of the Balinese community, and if they dance tango, it should be considered a part of Balinese, cosmopolitan, contemporary culture. Whether the community will grow and include more people from Bali as wished by currently active tango dancers remains to be seen.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See the Casa Artista website [www.casaartistabali.com](http://www.casaartistabali.com) (last accessed 9<sup>th</sup> October 2018).

<sup>2</sup> The organizers of the Ubud community moved their *milonga* location in September 2018. The places in Ubud keep changing over the years and have included the Gana Hotel and Restaurant in Ubud, Menari shared dance space, Rondji Restaurant, and the Hujan Locale. (Personal conversation Kirill Shapran 5<sup>th</sup> September 2018, also see the “Tango in Ubud, Bali” Facebook page [www.facebook.com/groups/TangoInUbud/about/](http://www.facebook.com/groups/TangoInUbud/about/) (last accessed 9<sup>th</sup> October 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Stefani Kang, 19<sup>th</sup> July 2014, updated information from <http://stefanikang-tango.com> (last accessed 9<sup>th</sup> October 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Robert is an Austrian tango dancer who has a small clothing business and lives 3 months a year on Bali. Interview with Robert Jahr, 4<sup>th</sup> July 2018.

<sup>5</sup> All my interview partners were very aware of their own generalizing and speculating; their statements by no means imply that they think the Balinese would not be able to dance tango because of insurmountable cultural differences. On the contrary, their speculations were just a way of trying to understand with the hope of getting more people on Bali—and particularly more men—involved with tango, be they of Balinese or of any other background.

<sup>6</sup> Among others, I Wayan Sudirana and Palupi Warananingtyas (informal conversations July 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Personal conversation Agus Setiawan, guest relation officer of Tango Bali Club, and an anonymous Javanese tango dancer, 18th July 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Stefani added that by now (2018), some taxi dancers are able to make a living of it and have no additional jobs (chat on social media, 11<sup>th</sup> October 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Stefani Kang, 19<sup>th</sup> July 2014, updated.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.balitangoinparadise.com> (last accessed 9<sup>th</sup> October 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Having a personal, male taxi dancer is common in Jakarta social dance venues.

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